

# Interdisciplinary Teaching of Theatre and Human Rights in Honors

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One of the centerpieces of honors education is careful research and thorough analysis of what we teach and why we teach our chosen subjects. In creating my honors class Theatre and Human Rights, I explored how I would teach the course and the various components best suited to teaching this topic. After first considering the topic of human rights and its relevance to theatre in an honors context, I then considered the value of interdisciplinary teaching in such a course and what its impact could be on helping students understand human rights, specifically through the study of Athol Fugard's 1982 play "*Master Harold*" . . . *and the Boys*. Considering the topic of theatre and human rights, its background, pedagogy, and philosophy may provide an example of the kind of work that goes into making honors education a distinct segment of higher education in North America today.

## BACKGROUND

Since spring 2012, I have taught a 300-level Theatre and Human Rights class in the University of New Mexico Honors College. The class includes

fourteen twentieth-century plays written by playwrights from nine countries as well as excerpts from three secondary sources: Andrew Clapham's *Human Rights: A Very Short Introduction*, Micheline R. Ishay's *The Human Rights Reader: Major Political Essays, Speeches and Documents from the Bible to the Present*, and Paul Rae's *Theatre and Human Rights*. The plays and secondary sources address a variety of human rights concerns from the impact of war on humanity and the environment to racial, ethnic, gender, and LGBTQ+ discrimination. We consider each topic within its national context, but each topic is also universal, addressing ongoing human rights concerns.

For example, we end the course with *Angels in America*, Tony Kushner's Pulitzer Prize winning, two-part play about the devastation of AIDS in Ronald Reagan's America during the 1980s. AIDS is still one of the worst pandemic diseases, considered one of "the big three" infectious diseases along with malaria and tuberculosis. In 2013, 2.1 million people became infected with AIDS. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 50 million people worldwide live with HIV in 2016.

My goal for this honors class has been to capture as many different human rights concerns as possible through the works of a variety of playwrights from different countries. Other approaches of this kind could also work well in an honors curriculum. For instance, one might focus on women's rights, in which case the reading list could include female playwrights such as Marina Carr, Patricia Burke-Brogan, Liz Lochhead, Griselda Gambaro, Ama Ata Aidoo, Lorraine Hansberry, Marsha Norman, Anna Deavere Smith, Suzan-Lori Parks, Ntozake Shange, Eve Ensler, Cherríe Moraga, Danai Gurira, and Caryl Churchill.

## WHY TO DISCUSS HUMAN RIGHTS IN HONORS

Human rights is a subject on the rise in the academic world. According to Sarita Cargas and Cece Shantzek, "with the growth of the human rights 'industry,' academia must realize its role in preparing human rights professionals" (2). Cargas also points out that the LEAP initiative (Liberal Education and America's Promise) of the Association of American Colleges and Universities "argues that teaching human rights is a 'high-impact educational practice' for all undergraduates" (Cargas 7). Over ten universities in North America offer a bachelor's degree in human rights: Columbia University, Barnard College, Southern Methodist University, Trinity College, University of Dayton, Webster University, Carleton University, St. Thomas University, University of Ontario Institute of Technology, University of Toronto, Wilfrid Laurier

University–Brantford, and York University. Many other universities offer a minor or concentration in human rights.

In addition, most North American universities offer courses on human rights theory, practice, and law through such departments as American Studies, Anthropology, Education, History, Honors, International Relations, Languages, Peace Studies, Philosophy, Political Science, Religion, and Sociology.

Given this availability of human rights courses, an ongoing question for academics is whether human rights is a discipline unto itself or an interdisciplinary field of study. Joseph Wronka expresses the prominent tendency of American universities, which has been to “incorporate human rights into various disciplines” (123). Jerry A. Jacobs, in his insightful *In Defense of Disciplines*, defines a discipline as “a broadly accepted field of study that is institutionalized as a degree-granting department in a large number of colleges and universities” (27). With this definition in mind, Jacobs probably would not consider human rights a discipline, and Cargas would probably question this definition. She acknowledges a wide disparity in human rights courses because they are offered through many different departments, but she insists that human rights programs in U.S. universities suffer from “a lack of rigor or coherence” (1) because, even in the American colleges and universities that offer a BA in human rights, “there is not one [human rights] course common to them all” (13). Cargas explains her strong case for human rights as a separate discipline: “Human rights indicates something fairly specific. It has its own history, arguments, essential documents, and its own conversation in the journals, the scholarly books, and among the NGOs[;] . . . human rights fits all the criteria of being a discipline” (3), an argument that I find persuasive and that may well represent the future of human rights in academia, standardizing the field of study and also providing this emerging field with more recognition and legitimacy.

Honors programs are ideally suited to teaching human rights, thanks to their smaller, seminar-style, discussion-based classes. Given the wide array of human rights classes available in honors programs and colleges across the U.S, honors has been a leader in teaching human rights. Some of these classes include “Science, Social Justice and Activism” in the Arizona State University Barrett Honors College, “Inequalities in a Globalizing World” in the University of South Florida Honors College, “Social Justice and Health” in the University of Minnesota Honors Program, “Global Citizenship and Social Responsibility” in the Boise State Honors Program, “Understanding and Combating Human Trafficking” in the University of Washington Honors Program, and “Solutions to Human Rights Problems” in the University of New Mexico Honors College.

The *JNCHC* article, “Assessing Social Justice as a Learning Outcome in Honors,” by Naomi Yavneh Klos, Kendall Eskine, and Michael Pashkevich, illustrates how honors programs are emphasizing the significance of teaching human rights, rightly arguing that “questions of social justice and civic engagement are an increasing focus of attention in honors education” in order to help students “to understand social structures, the forces that govern them, and the possibilities for both inequity and social change” (53; 54). My Theatre and Human Rights class has certainly confirmed this assessment.

Similarly, I applaud Gordon Shepherd and Gary Shepherd’s *JNCHC* article, which explains why human rights classes are vital for honors students. Shepherd and Shepherd astutely insist that we ask what impact honors classes have on our students’ “civic responsibility, including civic tolerance toward various marginalized minority groups” (88), a consideration that provocatively challenges honors students’ understanding of their world. Human rights courses offer what Klos, Eskine, and Pashkevich wisely suggest is critical in an honors education: providing “ongoing training in the historical understanding of justice, in the embrace of diverse cultures and traditions, and in the experience of others” (54). My honors class both includes and enlarges this historical background about social justice through an interdisciplinary approach, as we explore theatrical depictions of human rights violations.

## WHY INTERDISCIPLINARY TEACHING

According to Allen F. Repko’s *Interdisciplinary Research: Process and Theory*, interdisciplinary studies is “a process of answering a question, solving a problem or addressing a topic that is too broad or complex to be dealt with adequately by a single discipline and draws on disciplinary perspectives and integrates their insights to produce a more comprehensive understanding” (12). Repko focuses on the benefits of interdisciplinary teaching in *Introduction to Interdisciplinary Studies*, where he astutely insists that interdisciplinary classes promote “perspective taking and thinking critically about conflicting information on an issue or problem from multiple knowledge sources” (Repko, Szostak, and Buchberger xviii). Repko pinpoints one of the main advantages of interdisciplinary teaching: that it provides—I would add, even encourages—a more complete assessment of a problem.

As human rights is a growing subject in U.S. universities, so is interdisciplinary teaching. As Jacobs notes, “interdisciplinarity is everywhere—neuroscience, nanotechnology, bioengineering, behavioral economics, and the digital humanities—not to mention various racial, ethnic and gender studies

programs” (123). Robert J. Sternberg concurs with Jacobs in his article “Interdisciplinary Problem-Based Learning: An Alternative to Traditional Majors and Minors,” where he proposes that because our lives in the twenty-first century demand an interdisciplinary approach, so must our teaching. Proponents of interdisciplinary teaching contend that the wide array of problems we face around the world “aggressively cross boundaries that render the perspectives and methods of single disciplines incomplete and inefficacious” (Sternberg 123). Correspondingly, by integrating disciplines we give our students more information that they need to solve such multifaceted issues as human rights violations. Sternberg’s and Repko’s insistence on the value of interdisciplinary teaching specifically applies to my Theatre and Human Rights class as the problems our playwrights write about come directly from real, complex human rights abuses. I also propose that the “live” element of plays in performance allows the characters to actively brainstorm solutions to these problems in front of a live audience, in turn inspiring the audience to discuss solutions.

Interdisciplinary classes are a core part of most honors programs. For instance, all UNM honors classes give students “the opportunity to discover connections among disciplines” (UNM Honors College). My Theatre and Human Rights honors class includes the following disciplines:

1. **Fine Arts** (studying plays from the performance angle: discussing playwrights, directors, actors, choreographers, and designers as well as reading reviews of performances and watching live performances, taped stage versions, and films);
2. **History** (investigating the history of different countries we are studying as well as historical background on the human rights issues);
3. **Human Rights Theory** (learning about the development of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or UDHR);
4. **Biography** (examining playwrights’ lives and other work in detail);
5. **Economics and Political Theory** (exploring some of the most important economic systems in the twentieth century that have influenced our playwrights and their work, such as Communism and Socialism, and discussing human rights organizations’ aims).

The Association of American Colleges and Universities’ “Integrative Value Rubric” states that “developing students’ capacities for integrative learning is central to personal success, social responsibility, and civic engagement in today’s global society. Students face a rapidly changing and increasingly

connected world where integrative learning becomes not just a benefit . . . but a necessity.” As my honors class integrates disciplines to study human rights, students learn more about the issues, leading them to what Warren Prior succinctly calls understanding how “human rights represent the conditions that people need to flourish” (19). The plays my students read and watch depict people suffering under terrible conditions; interdisciplinary learning helps students see the reasons behind this suffering.

## **WHY THEATRE IS ONE OF THE BEST APPROACHES TO INTERDISCIPLINARY TEACHING OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN HONORS**

Arguably the most public of all the arts, theatre has long provided a lively platform for discussion of social justice issues, from Aristophanes’ overt criticism of the Peloponnesian War in his outrageous Ancient Greek comedy *Lysistrata* to the Belarus Free Theater’s controversial *Trash Cuisine* (2015), which explores institutionalized killing.

Although *JNCHC* and *Honors in Practice* have published articles that explore the benefits of teaching theatre and human rights individually in honors, they have not included articles that explore the importance of interdisciplinary teaching of these disciplines. I share Margaret Franson’s view from her 2001 *JNCHC* article, “The Play’s the Thing’: Theater Arts and Liberal Learning,” which advocates the many benefits of including the performing arts in honors. Franson declares that the arts contain “inherent powers” to fulfill the National Collegiate Honors Council’s 2013 “Definition of Honors Education,” which states that honors “provides opportunities for measurably broader, deeper, and more complex learning-centered and learner-directed experiences” (Franson 21). As Franson wisely notes, performing arts honors classes can “deepen self-knowledge, to develop the virtues most useful in the pursuit of truth, to build community, to enhance appreciation for the ways in which texts of all kinds function to make meaning and evoke feeling” (21); these goals for student growth mirror those of many honors programs. For example, the UNM Honors College’s mission statement reflects a common thread in honors education: “to provide challenging opportunities for an intensive interdisciplinary and cross-cultural liberal education to highly motivated, talented and creative undergraduates in all majors and to build a community of scholars” (UNM Honors College).

Building on Franson's view of the importance of including the performing arts in honors education, I suggest that theatre is an ideal discipline to teach honors students about human rights because plays bring human rights concerns to a more personal level through poignant depictions of realistic characters, relationships, dialogue, and situations. If plays provide a stimulating ground for instigating a variety of conversations about human rights, it follows that combining disciplines—teaching about human rights through the theatre—is one of the best approaches in the honors classroom by providing a more thorough understanding of the intricate relationships between subjects.

To illustrate, when we discuss Maria Irene Fornes' play *Fefu and Her Friends* through an interdisciplinary lens, we contemplate the history of women's rights in the U.S. as well as how feminism has shaped Fornes' eight female characters. This often surreal play is set in 1935 and was written in 1977; my students approach it from their twenty-first-century perspective. Instead of learning about women's studies as a single discipline, our interdisciplinary approach of combining theatre with human rights allows us to consider the twentieth-century American feminist movement from a multitude of angles.

*Theatre and Human Rights* author Paul Rae states that human rights issues "inform some of the most widely staged and studied plays of the post-war period" (20), plays that constitute the majority of texts in my honors course. Rae further comments on theatre's ability to highlight human rights violations when he insists that theatrical performances give us a "means of holding our actions, ourselves and our societies up to scrutiny in light of human rights concerns" (22). Human rights scholar Alison Brysk concurs in her *Speaking Rights to Power: Constructing Political Will*: "The power of performance is an extension of the ability of narrative to raise consciousness of suffering, build empathetic bonds with its victims, and create understanding of its causes and consequences" (131). Walking in tandem with these scholars, my honors students quickly realize the agile platform theatre can provide for encouraging lively discussions of human rights. One student wrote in her final research paper that through this class, she had discovered how theatre is "an amazing ground for challenging human rights violations" because it "holds the audience witness to such crimes . . . while forcing the audience to hold some responsibility for these actions." She concluded that theatre was "the best place" to present an argument for human rights because the audience was not only captive but were capable of taking action to brainstorm responses to the human rights violations the plays presented.

## THE FOURTEEN PLAYS/HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES

Below is a table of the plays our honors class reads alongside the human rights issue(s) each play considers.

Play	Playwright	Country	Human Rights Issue(s)	Time Period of Play
<i>The Plough and the Stars</i>	Sean O'Casey	Ireland	War and Colonialism	1916
<i>Mother Courage and Her Children</i>	Bertolt Brecht	Europe, mainly Poland, Italy and Germany	War, specifically women in war	1618–1648
<i>Waiting for Godot</i>	Samuel Beckett	Post-World War II Europe	Aftermath of World War II	1953
<i>The Crucible</i>	Arthur Miller	United States	Salem Witch Trials and McCarthyism	1692–1693
<i>The Freedom of the City</i>	Brian Friel	Northern Ireland	“The Troubles” in Northern Ireland	1973
<i>Fefu and Her Friends</i>	Maria Irene Fornes	United States	Women's Rights	1935
<i>Pantomime</i>	Derek Walcott	Trinidad and Tobago	Colonialism	1978
<i>Zoot Suit</i>	Luis Valdez	United States	Hispanic Civil Rights	1943
<i>“Master Harold” . . . and the Boys</i>	Athol Fugard	South Africa	Apartheid	1950
<i>The Bus Stop</i>	Gao Xingjian	China	Communism	1983
<i>Miss Saigon</i>	Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boublil	Vietnam	Vietnam War	1975; 1978
<i>Fences</i>	August Wilson	United States	African-American Civil Rights	1957; 1965
<i>Only Drunks and Children Tell the Truth</i>	Drew Hayden Taylor	Canada	Native Peoples of Canada	1996



<i>Angels in America</i> , Part One and Part Two, <i>Perestroika</i> and <i>Millennium Approaches</i>	Tony Kushner	United States	AIDS and GLBTQ+ Rights	1985–1990
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## DISCUSSING HUMAN RIGHTS IN “*MASTER HAROLD*” . . . *AND THE BOYS*, BY ATHOL FUGARD

On the surface, not much happens in this short play that lasts only an hour and a half without intermission. The scene is simple: a tea room during a rainy afternoon in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, in 1950. We meet three characters: Hally, the white, seventeen-year-old son of the owners of the tea room who has just returned home from school and two Black waiters, Sam and Willie, who mop the floor and clean the cafe while Hally discusses his day at school. We quickly see that Hally has a close friendship with Sam and Willie, and especially Sam.

“*Master Harold*” is a frank autobiography of Athol Fugard’s agonized growing up with an alcoholic, disabled father and his mother in South Africa in the 1950s; it is a reenactment of his complicated relationship with his good friend and mentor, Sam, the Fugard family’s Black employee; it is also a quiet, piercing reflection on the legacy of apartheid.

Our Theatre and Human Rights honors class approaches this gripping play through an interdisciplinary lens, using techniques from various disciplines.

### History

We explore the background on the overriding human rights issue, which is apartheid. Apartheid—which means “separateness” in Afrikaans, the language of the Dutch settlers who arrived in South Africa in 1652—was maintained as the racist regime from 1948 to 1993. During apartheid, South Africa’s ruling National Party, composed of the roughly 21% white minority, promoted a white supremacist Christian National State, using racial segregation to enforce its rule over the roughly 79% Black and “Colored” (meaning mixed race) majority.

South African segregation under apartheid involved all education; medical care and other public services; housing; voting rights; marriage laws and

birth rates; and sexual relations between Whites and Blacks/Coloreds. The government also strictly restricted women's rights. These constraints were enforced through numerous laws approved in the 1940s–1950s, which my honors students discuss in detail:

- A. **Pass Laws** (1948): the requirement that all Blacks and Coloreds carry a passbook.
- B. **Population Registration Act** (1950): the racial registration system that classified by color.
- C. **Group Areas Act** (1950): the rules determining where Black and Colored people could live and what property they could buy, also segregating races in all public places, including theatres. (Notably, having a Black and a White actor on stage during apartheid was illegal; Fugard's acting company disobeyed this law.)
- D. **Amendment to the Immorality Act** (1950): the prohibition of sexual relations between races.
- E. **Suppression of Communism Act** (1950): the government's right to ban suspected Communists without trial or appeal.
- F. **Bantu Education Act** (1953): the government's control of all South African schools.
- G. **Extension of University Act** (1959): the prohibition of admitting African students to all universities except with special permission by the government.

## Biography

We ponder the life of Nelson Mandela (1918–2013), exploring his experiences as an anti-apartheid activist who was imprisoned for twenty-seven years, followed by his presidency of South Africa from 1994 to 1999, his co-award of the Nobel Peace Prize with F. W. de Klerk in 1993, and his legacy following his death in 2013.

## Autobiography

We discuss the play from its devastating autobiographical level, with Fugard looking back on the most shameful episode of his childhood, which he recreates in the play.

## FINE ARTS AND HUMAN RIGHTS

As we intersect the disciplines of fine arts and human rights, we begin by understanding why the South African government banned the play in both written and performance form, this play being one of several that our honors class reads that have been banned. We then consider the play from a performance angle, beginning with Fugard's decision to open the play outside of South Africa. We ponder its world premiere in 1982 in the United States at the Yale Repertory, followed by a successful transfer to Broadway that same year. We also discuss the 2003 Broadway revival and compare the play's initial critical and commercial success to its quieter reception in 2003. Our discussion of "*Master Harold*" . . . and *the Boys* comes to life by watching scenes from a film version of the play. Seeing the plays come alive always makes a deep impression on my honors students. After my spring 2015 class watched the climactic scene from the 2010 "*Master Harold*" film, the entire class was speechless.

When we turn a detailed eye to what happens in the play, we consider Fugard's decision not to even mention apartheid. This absence is perhaps more powerful than hammering us with the term since it is still the play's most pervasive, dominant element. Fugard makes it clear that this underlying, legally mandated racism has kept Sam and Willie from obtaining any formal education, severely limited their housing options, and forced them into low-paying jobs with no opportunities for advancement. Likewise, apartheid will clearly enable Hally to rise above his Black friends and mentors simply because he is white.

As a member of the white ruling class, Hally represents the force of repression, which he gleefully acknowledges in the play's ugliest, climactic moments. Pushed to the brink of anger and embarrassment after learning that his alcoholic and disabled father is returning home from the hospital and grimly anticipating his father's pestering him for money to buy alcohol, Hally lashes out at Sam and Willie, caustically telling them his "favorite joke," which he shares with his father, about "a nigger's arse" not being "fair" (648). After this deplorable insult, and Sam's retaliation by dropping his pants so that Hally can "have a good look" at his "real Basuto arse," Hally spits in Sam's face (648). Fugard described this episode of spitting in Sam's face as the moment that "totally symbolized the ugliness, the potential ugliness waiting for me as a White South African" (qtd. in Durbach 509). After watching Hally's degrading behavior to his friends, honors students realize the rigid power structure that apartheid mandated as they link history, biography, autobiography, human rights, and fine arts in a seamless, potent thread.

## THE BENEFITS OF INTERDISCIPLINARY TEACHING OF THEATRE AND HUMAN RIGHTS TO HONORS STUDENTS

On the last day of the fall 2015 semester, I asked my seventeen students to describe—anonously—how the interdisciplinary nature of our honors class had influenced their understanding of how theatre and human rights interconnect, specifically in *“Master Harold” . . . and the Boys*. One student responded,

In *“Master Harold” . . . and the Boys*, the understanding of the human rights violations was crucial to the analysis of the play as a whole. It is the foundation on which the play is based and therefore plays a major role in the play itself. Without this understanding, I do not think I would be able to grasp the implications or intensity of the ideas expressed in the play.

Another student echoed this viewpoint, explaining,

Especially in *“Master Harold” . . . and the Boys*, it’s important to recognize the depth and complexity of the issues confronted in the play. It deals with racism, apartheid, hate, shame, growth and the delicacy of personal relationships. This play cannot be understood solely as a literary work or solely as historical commentary. It is a memoir; a powerful statement about hate; a work of art. It requires multiple angles and lenses to understand something as multifaceted and complex as a play dealing with human rights issues.

Perhaps what teaching Theatre and Human Rights in an interdisciplinary context has shown me, above all, is that honors students develop a deeper understanding of a topic when they feel emotionally connected to several disciplines. In the case of *“Master Harold,”* we learn about the history of apartheid through reading Fugard’s play, and then we watch it in painful action. As a result, the class feels empathy for Sam, Willie, and even Hally. As Kathy J. Cooke comments in *“Cultivating Awareness in Honors: First-Person Noting and Contemplative Practices,”* we need to be reminded of “how intertwined emotion and thinking can be” (198), which my students clearly demonstrated in their responses.

One student expressed the interconnection particularly well, saying that “plays give a more personal way to see human rights. . . . [This honors class] is not a ‘theory’ . . . you see how these human rights violations affect the

characters' lives." Our Theatre and Human Rights class is, in the words of David Brooks, an example of "using art to reteach people how to see." Thanks to the persuasive power of the theatre, exemplified in "*Master Harold*" . . . and *the Boys*, honors students' understanding of human rights can grow exponentially.

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